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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 BEIRUT 001678

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STATE FOR NEA FRONT OFFICE AND NEA/ELA; NSC FOR  
ABRAMS/SINGH/GAVITO/YERGER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/26/2027  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PTER](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)  
SUBJECT: LEBANON: AOUN, CLAIMING THE ABILITY TO BOSS  
NASRALLAH AROUND, RELUCTANT TO DISCUSS FALL-BACK TO  
PRESIDENCY

REF: STATE 148539

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Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

11. (C) If Michel Aoun is thinking of realistic fall-back options to his presidential options as some of his advisors insist, he draws a line at discussing them. Yet his unusually passionless presentation differed from his sharp words, making us wonder -- especially when he threatened (or, some one would say, promised) to "disappear" if not elected president -- if he knows he has little chance of succeeding. In a 10/26 meeting with Ambassador Feltman, Aoun maintained that only he is worthy of the presidency. Asked whether Hizballah's refusal to endorse him gives him pause, Aoun said he would corner Hizballah: claiming to as popular with Lebanon's Shia as Hassan Nasrallah, Aoun said that Hizballah has no choice but to vote for him. Nasrallah for the same reasons must follow his presidential orders. Pressed, Aoun divulged only one alternative, dusting off an old idea: an interim "salvation" government, followed by early legislative elections and then presidential elections. He cautioned that, without either a "salvation" government or an Aoun presidency, the risk of a second cabinet remains.

12. (C) Asked about his contacts with March 14 leaders, Aoun expressed willingness to work with Saad Hariri, once Saad proves he is serious. Walid Jumblatt needs to drop the anti-Hizballah rhetoric before an Aoun-Jumblatt rapprochement is possible. Noting he was anti-clerical, Aoun criticized Maronite Patriarch Sfeir and dismissed the Bkirki meetings as "child's play." He was curiously -- perhaps ominously -- ambiguous about Michel Sleiman, while claiming that Egypt and Saudi Arabia are helping to promote the LAF Commander. In the meeting's high point, Aoun defended UNSCR 1559, noting that UNSCR 1701 preferred by his Hizballah allies does not have sufficient focus on Palestinian disarmament. Provoking Aoun's trademark visible annoyance at last, the Ambassador delivered the message (reftel) about the financial and travel consequences of joining or supporting a second cabinet. End summary and comment.

AOUN CONFIDENT HE WILL BE PRESIDENT

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¶3. (C) The Ambassador met with Michel Aoun, accompanied for the first few minutes by son-in-law and advisor Gebran Bassil, on 10/26. The Ambassador outlined for Aoun our analysis of several different potential scenarios for the weeks ahead, noting that none of the likely options seemed to lead to an Aoun presidency. Commenting that a general of his experience never lacks for fall-back strategies and ways out, the Ambassador expressed confidence that Aoun had considered various options himself. Laughing with surprising amiability, Aoun responded that "no one can tell me why I shouldn't be president." He expressed full confidence that he will be president.

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AOUN CLAIMS POPULARITY WITH THE SHIA  
MEANS HIZBALLAH MUST VOTE FOR AND OBEY HIM  
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¶4. (C) The Ambassador noted the ambiguous public comments from Hizballah representatives and the references in media aligned with Hizballah that suggest that Hizballah does not, in fact, back General Aoun's candidacy. Elections, Aoun responded, will "corner" Hizballah. Hizballah will have no choice but to back him, because Hizballah's most important aspect is its popularity. If Hizballah would back any other candidate, Hizballah would lose its popularity and suffer erosion in its legitimacy. Noting the Ambassador's perplexed look, Aoun responded, as Gebran nodded vigorously, that, "you see, I am as popular, maybe more so, than Hassan Nasrallah" with Lebanon's Shia. Therefore, Nasrallah would not dare risk his own position by defying popular Shia will.

¶5. (C) In addition, Nasrallah's enforced allegiance to Aoun is a mark in favor of an Aoun presidency: Because of the passions of the Shia street for Aoun, Nasrallah would have no

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choice but to follow Aoun's presidential orders. The Ambassador asked whether President Aoun would be able to order disarmament. Not right away, Aoun noted, but once the Shia felt they had "proper weight" in the government and appropriate support in the presidency, they would not cling to their weapons but rather adhere to the state. The Ambassador mused about whether Iran and Syria would allow their strategic ally such latitude. Aoun noted that the Shia will see that they have no choice and no need to fear disarmament under an Aoun presidency.

IF NOT PRESIDENT, AOUN  
MUSES ABOUT "DISAPPEARING"  
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¶6. (C) The Ambassador pressed, noting that he could envision no scenario under which Aoun becomes president. While he has the right to fight for the presidency, would he really risk his entire movement and all of his principles by putting all of his eggs in the presidential basket? He could exercise enormous leverage today on the entire process. Claiming that an Aoun program without Aoun as president does not work, Aoun responded, "perhaps I'll disappear." If the Lebanese system is really so broken that the most popular Christian leader cannot ascend to Baabda Palace, then Lebanon no longer deserves the service and patriotism of General Aoun. General Aoun will not accept being "politically impotent." He evinced no interest in trying to sacrifice presidential dreams in favor of salvaging his program and playing an enormously influential role through other means. "We waited 15 years (referring to the Paris exile); we can wait 15 more," he said (promising, in essence, to defy average lifespan).

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DUSTING OFF "INTERIM CABINET" PROPOSAL,  
WITH LEGISLATIVE PRECEDING PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS  
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17. (C) Asked again by the Ambassador about any fall-back strategies, Aoun raised his old idea of an "interim salvation government," a cabinet that would replace Siniora's and assume the presidential powers upon the expiration of Lahoud's term. The cabinet representation would be based on parliamentary representation, roughly 50-50 at this point. Its primary task would be to organize early legislative elections, under a new election law, to get a more accurate reflection of current Lebanese politics. Then, after the new parliament is sworn in, presidential elections would be organized, followed by a new cabinet. The Ambassador said that he calculated that March 14 would never agree to what would be political suicide, dissolving the only body in which it has some control. Aoun shrugged. That's the only way, he said, if "they" won't accept an Aoun presidency. Otherwise, Lahoud will stay, and Lahoud will appoint a second cabinet. The Ambassador expressed surprise: isn't the second cabinet idea now set aside? For now, yes, Aoun acknowledged, "but it will be back on the table after November 23" (the expiration of Lahoud's term).

NO SERIOUS DIALOGUE WITH MARCH 14;  
PATRIARCH'S ROLE "CHILD'S PLAY"

18. (C) The Ambassador tried to elicit Aoun's predictions of what is going to happen in the upcoming weeks. Aoun said that either he becomes president, an interim salvation cabinet is formed, or "there will be trouble." Aoun said that he did not take seriously the March 14 threats of using an absolute majority to elect a president, claiming that March 14 does not have the votes. "But you shouldn't encourage them," he warned. The Ambassador asked whether it isn't possible that all of the current intra-Lebanese dialogue efforts might actually pay off in some kind of solution. Aoun himself, the Ambassador noted, has had many contacts with advisors to Saad Hariri, Walid Jumblatt, and Samir Geagea.

19. (C) Aoun predicted that these Aoun-March 14 contacts would not produce results. He expressed a willingness to deal constructively with Saad Hariri, but only after Saad "shows that he's serious." Describing at length a series of

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half-hearted and aborted attempts at an Aoun-Hariri face-to-face meeting, Aoun pronounced that Hariri "doesn't know what he wants. When he does, he knows where I am." As for Walid Jumblatt, Aoun said that he would not see him until he toned down his anti-Hizballah rhetoric. If Aoun saw Jumblatt now, he would harm his position in the Shia community and gain nothing in return. Moreover, Aoun said, "I am still waiting" for Jumblatt to visit him after Aoun's May 2005 return from exile. "Let him come see me," Aoun concluded. As for Samir Geagea, Aoun gave a wordless dismissive flick of the hand. The meeting earlier in the week with former President Amine Gemayel "was not serious."

110. (C) Asked whether Maronite Patriarch Sfeir's initiative is playing a helpful role, Aoun described the meetings with the Patriarch and the March 14-March 8/Aoun working committee as "child's play, students' exercises." Noting that he was a devout Maronite but "against the clergy's involvement in politics," Aoun criticized Sfeir as "too old" and "too confused." Sfeir should stick to religion and leave politics to the politicians, particularly as Sfeir has proven to be a bad politician. Asked what he would do if Sfeir managed to put together a list of acceptable candidates, Aoun responded confidently, "he won't do it." The Ambassador noted that it is no secret that the Patriarch has said that neither Nassib Lahoud nor Michel Aoun should become president, given that half of Lebanon allegedly rejects each. Aoun went into a long description of times when, in his view, the Patriarch did more harm than good in trying to intervene politically. Maybe, the Ambassador conceded, but many are looking to the Patriarch for guidance. The Patriarch's role is religious,

not political, Aoun repeated.

AOUN DISMISSES SLEIMAN  
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¶11. (C) If he dismissed Geagea and Gemayel and wants the Patriarch to stay out of the "name game," the Ambassador asked, doesn't Aoun risk leaving the field to the Muslims, particularly Saad Hariri and Nabih Berri, to have the strongest voices on Lebanon's next president? Won't Hariri and Berri ultimately make a deal that's good for them but not necessarily good for the Christians and certainly not for Aoun's movement? Aoun asked what the Ambassador meant. The Ambassador offered scenarios by which someone with the "neutral" profile of Robert Ghanem would ascend to Baabda via a deal by Berri and Hariri, with the cooperation of Aoun allies Ily Skaff, Michel Murr, and the Armenian Tashnaq party. Aoun said that the Maronites would not permit such a scenario.

¶12. (C) The Ambassador raised the issue of LAF Commander Michel Sleiman, noting that many people made a convincing case that he is the genuine candidate of Syria and Hizballah, once Aoun is traded away. "It needs two-thirds," Aoun said, referring to the required constitutional amendment. Yes, the Ambassador said, but what if the Patriarch accepts the inevitability of Sleiman as the only potential candidate? Would people really refuse to amend the constitution? Wouldn't it be better for Aoun to play a decisive role in deciding who is president rather than allow Sleiman to be forced upon Lebanon by Syria as the only acceptable choice?

¶13. (C) Aoun said that the problem with Sleiman is in part an Egyptian and Saudi problem. Egyptian President Mubarak just received Sleiman in Egypt, making him look very presidential. And Aoun cited sources inside the LAF (of which he has many) noting that Saudi Arabia has also invited him for a visit. These are "presidential job interviews," Aoun said. "Tell your Arab and European friends" not to back Sleiman. The Ambassador said again that Aoun has the power now to prevent a Sleiman presidency, by working today with March 14 leaders, especially Samir Geagea, to identify acceptable candidates to take to parliament. "I am the compromise candidate," Aoun said.

STRONG SUPPORT FOR 1559  
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14, (C) Taking the initiative in the conversation for the first time, Aoun talked at some length about how the U.S.

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strategic vision for Lebanon -- a strong, publicly accountable state at peace with its neighbors and subject to the rule of law at home -- corresponds exactly with his vision. We differ only in how to achieve that. He noted that some March 14 presidential candidates (e.g., Boutros Harb) are ready to trade away UNSCR 1559. He, however, is a firm believer in UNSCR 1559, which calls more clearly for the disbanding and disarmament of non-Lebanese militias. UNSCR 1701 does not have strong, clear language regarding Palestinian arms. He claimed that Hizballah maintains its grip on Lebanon's Shia through manipulation of fears. Once Aoun brings peace to the Israeli-Lebanese relationship and the hated Siniora cabinet is gone, then Hizballah will not have an enemy to mobilize support. The Ambassador noted that Hizballah makes enemies as needed, such as when the Shia, who used the Siniora cabinet as a political shield during the 2006 Hizballah-Israel war, ordered their ministers to resign from the same cabinet a few months later. "Leave Hizballah to me," General Aoun said.

WARNING OF SECOND CABINET  
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¶15. (C) The Ambassador returned the conversation to the

possibility of a second, illegal cabinet or an illegal extension of Emile Lahoud's term in Baabda Palace. Drawing from reftel points, the Ambassador outlined for Aoun the potential financial and travel penalties of any affiliation with such scenarios. For the first time in the meeting, Aoun's face flashed red, with the trademark clenched-lips frozen smile he assumes when unhappy (and which give Lebanese political comedians a field day rivaled only by imitations of Walid Jumblatt). "You are interfering," Aoun said. No, the Ambassador said, we are supporting the single, legitimate state of Lebanon. Please, the Ambassador said, do not allow yourself or your movement to be involved with a second cabinet, the prolongation of Lahoud's residence in Baabda, or street violence aimed at taking over GOL institutions. There will be consequences. "O.k, o.k," Aoun said. "But don't threaten me."

COMMENT

¶16. (C) With increasing frequency, Aoun deputies and advisors whisper to us that Aoun seeks an exit strategy, that he would trade presidential ambitions for the right package of positions, programs, and influence. In fact, we think that they are looking for their own exit strategy, not relishing the political suicide that seems the inevitable result of clinging to Aoun to the end. In this meeting, for example, Aoun gave no sign that he is willing to play the role of the "king maker" rather than the king. His words indicated that he remains committed to being king, come what may.

¶17. (C) Yet there was an odd absence of passion in the General's voice, indicating a disconnect between his words -- at times harsh (his criticisms of the Patriarch) and at times mad (his claimed ability to order Nasrallah around, which was not meant as a joke) -- and his manner. Until the demarche about the consequences of supporting a second cabinet, he remained genial, polite, friendly, mild-mannered throughout, no matter how many times we argued that Aoun will not be president. Many Lebanese would joke that Aoun "took his pills" today. But we wonder if he is going through the motions of insisting on his right to be president, while actually becoming resigned to the inevitability that he will not. Compared to previous tirades against LAF Commander Sleiman (whom Aoun had once accused of incompetence in our presence), Aoun was also curiously dispassionate about Sleiman's prospects. This could be an ominous sign, that Aoun knows Sleiman has Syria and Hizballah's backing.

¶18. (C) But, with Aoun so intensely focused on the presidency for decades, we wonder if he has something else in mind: that the Syrians will fail to get Sleiman elected and thus some kind of vacancy will prevail in the presidency after Lahoud (we hope) turns into a pumpkin at midnight on 11/23. He may welcome such scenarios as giving him a chance to rally Christian fervor to his side, by whipping up support

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by claiming that the Christian presidency has been stolen by the Muslims and March 14. (It didn't work so well for him in 1988-90, of course.) One thing is certain: Aoun provided not a single hint that he is willing to play a constructive role in solving the crisis, except through an Aoun presidency

Those who are counting on Aoun accepting the role of a king maker are, so far, hallucinating. As for the more sober-minded and fearful Aoun deputies, however, we may discover opportunities. We will see most of them individually in the days to come, as we deliver reftel's points.

FELTMAN